Verificationism and religious language[1]

What are we doing when we are talking about God? Are we stating truths, facts, how things are? Or is religious language meaningful in some other way, e.g. expressing an attitude or commitment toward the world, rather than trying to describe it? Is talk about God meaningful at all? In this handout, we consider one answer to these questions, given by the theory of verificationism. Before doing so, we need to make a distinction between two families of theories about how religious language might get its meaning.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN COGNITIVISM AND NON-COGNITIVISM

We can draw a distinction between two families of answer to the question of whether and how religious language is meaningful. Cognitivism claims that religious language expresses beliefs. Beliefs can be true or false, so religious claims that can be true or false. To believe that God exists is to believe that the sentence 'God exists' is true. Religious language aims to describe the world. Cognitivists do not have to claim that this is *all* that religious language does. But they argue that it is how religious language is meaningful.

Non-cognitivism claims that religious language does not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. And so religious claims do not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. They express an attitude toward the world, a way of understanding or relating to the world. (We may still want to talk of religious 'beliefs' but this is better understood as 'faith' or 'belief in God' than as 'belief that God exists'.)

VERIFICATIONISM

In the 1930s, a school of philosophy arose called logical positivism, concerned with the foundations of knowledge. It developed a criterion for when a statement is meaningful, called the principle of verifiability, also known as the verification principle. On A. J. Ayer's version, the verification principle says that a statement only has meaning if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. He explains and defends the principle in *Language, Truth and Logic*. The verification principle is a cognitivist view of language generally. It says that language is only (literally or semantically) meaningful if it is cognitive.

A statement is analytic if it is true or false in virtue of the meanings of the words. For example, 'Bachelors are unmarried' is analytic and true; 'Squares have three sides' is analytic and false. A statement is empirically verifiable if empirical evidence would go towards establishing that the statement is true or false. For

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[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 151, 154-9

example, if I say 'The moon is made of green cheese', we can check this by scientific investigation. If I say 'The universe has 600 trillion planets', we can't check this by scientific investigation in practice, but we can do so in principle. We know how to show whether it is true or false, so it is 'verifiable' even though we can't actually verify it. Furthermore, we don't need to be able to prove that an empirical claim is true or false. For empirical verification, it is enough for empirical evidence to raise or reduce the probability that a statement is true.

According to the verification principle, we must say that religious language is cognitive if it is meaningful at all. But there are there limitations on what we can meaningfully talk about. So what can we say about the proposition 'God exists' and other claims about God? Despite the best attempts of ontological arguments, Ayer argues, we cannot prove 'God exists' from a priori premises using deduction alone. So 'God exists' is not analytically true. On the other hand, if 'God exists' is an empirical claim, then it must be possible to imagine the conditions under which we would say that it was or was not a fact. But we cannot empirically test whether God exists or not. If a statement is an empirical hypothesis, it predicts that our experience will be different depending on whether it is true or false. The claim 'God exists' makes no predictions about our experience. So it is not empirically verifiable.

P1.   The verification principle: all meaningful claims are either analytic or empirically verifiable.
P2.   'God exists' is not analytic.
P3.   'God exists' is not empirically verifiable.
C1.   Therefore, 'God exists' is not meaningful.

Because most religious language depends on 'God exists' being meaningful, we can argue that most religious language is also meaningless.

Some philosophers argue that religious language attempts to capture something of religious experience, although it is 'inexpressible' in literal terms. Ayer responds that whatever religious experiences reveal, they cannot be said to reveal any facts. Facts are the content of statements that purport to be intelligible and can be expressed literally. If talk of God is non-empirical, it is literally unintelligible, hence meaningless.

OBJECTIONS
'Eschatological verification'
One response to Ayer's argument is to question whether he is right that religious claims cannot be verified empirically. In 'Theology and verification', John Hick understands verification to involve removing rational doubt, ignorance or uncertainty about the truth of some proposition through experience. An empirically verifiable claim makes some prediction about how our experience would be under certain conditions, e.g. 'There is a table next door' can be verified by sight or touch, but it requires us to go next door. Hick agrees with Ayer that 'God exists' is not a claim that we verify through our current experience. The disagreement between theist and atheist is not about what to expect in life.

However, this isn't enough to show that religious language is meaningless. Hick develops the idea of 'eschatological verification', verification in the afterlife or at the end of time. In believing that God exists, the (traditional Christian) theist believes that there will be unambiguous experiences of God in life after death. The atheist denies this.

Does this show that 'God exists' is meaningful? First, it must be meaningful to speak of an afterlife. All empirically verifiable statements are conditional – they predict what we will experience under certain conditions of observation. However, for this to apply to the afterlife, the concept of personal existence after death must be logically possible. Second, we must be able to form some conception of what an experience of God could be. Hick argues that we already have some sense of this, since we are aware that our experience in this life is ambiguous – it doesn't establish or disprove God's existence. He suggests that an experience of our personal fulfilment and relation to God could serve as verification.

Rejecting the verification principle
Hick's response to Ayer's challenge accepts the verification principle in some amended form. But a more common response is to reject it. According to the verification principle, the principle itself is meaningless. The claim that 'a statement only has meaning if it is analytic or can be verified empirically' is not analytic and cannot be verified empirically. But if the principle of verification is meaningless, then what it claims cannot be true. So if the principle is true, it is meaningless, and so not true. Obviously, if it is false, it is false. Either way it is not true. Therefore, it does not give us any reason to believe that religious language is meaningless.

Ayer claims that the principle is intended as a definition, not an empirical hypothesis about meaning. In other words, it is intended to reflect and clarify our understanding of 'meaningful' uses of words. Ayer accepts that the principle isn't obviously an accurate criterion of 'literal meaning', but that is why he provides arguments in specific cases, such as religious language, which support it.

But in that case, the verification principle is only as convincing as the arguments that are intended to show that it is the right definition of 'meaningful'. If we do not find the arguments convincing, the principle provides no independent support. However, the challenge remains: if religious language is cognitively meaningful, how is this so?

VERIFICATION AND FALSIFICATION
One response to the difficulties facing the verification principle is to replace it with a 'falsification' principle. A claim is falsifiable if it is logically incompatible with some (set of) empirical observations. We can suggest, then, that a claim is meaningful only if it rules out some possible experience. For example, 'There is a fork there' is incompatible with – rules out – the experience of reaching out and grasping nothing but thin air where we see the fork.

One apparent advantage of falsification is how it deals with generalisations. A claim such as 'All swans are white' threatens to be meaningless according to the

verification principle, because no experience will prove it true – there might always be a swan out there somewhere which isn't white. However, it is easy to prove false – observing a single non-white (black) swan will do it!

However, this advantage is balanced by distinct disadvantages. Hick notes that there are particular claims that are easy to verify but impossible to falsify, such as 'There are three successive 7s in the decimal determination of π', 3.141592 . . . . As soon as we find three 7s in a row, we have verified the claim. But because the decimal determination of π is infinitely long, we can never show that it is false (if it is false), because there may always be three 7s together later in the series. Or again, as Ayer notes in *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, existence claims are very difficult to falsify. 'There is a yeti' is easier to know how to prove true than false. So are claims about the future, e.g. 'The sea will one day encroach on this land'. And so are probability claims. 'There is a one-in-six chance the rolled die will show a six' is not falsified by 20 sixes in a row, since the probability of one-in-six may be restored over a larger number of throws. And this is always true, no matter how many times you roll the die.

So a falsification principle that requires a meaningful statement to entail some decisive, refuting empirical experience is unacceptable. Many meaningful statements do not clearly entail an observation with which they are logically incompatible. If, on the other hand, we weaken falsification to talk about evidence which would 'count against' the truth of some claim, then this is not different from Ayer's version of the verification principle. As explained above, for a statement to be 'verifiable', we know what experiences will support or reduce the probability of a claim. It is already part of Ayer's theory that we need to know what empirical experiences would lead us to reject a claim as well as what experiences support it.